

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Eight

Maggie Tice and Doreen

(Fictitious name used in this story)

THE MIRROR over the Chicago bar was gilt-trimmed and gaudy in the style of the early 1900's. But Maggie Tice didn't notice. She wasn't watching the reflection of herself - a medium tall woman with wispy brown hair, a woman who had daubed her face with bright rouge as if in the chance hope you might watch the circle of rouge and not see her snagged teeth. In the mirror next to Maggie was another face, dirtier, but younger, and framed with blond curls. It was the face of her little daughter, past three years.

"Come on now, Honey, get up on the counter and sing," Maggie coaxed the child. "Don't you be stand-offish. These are all friends of Mommie's."

A man, quite drunk, slouched nearer the two. "Want I should hold her up there, Maggie?"

The child pouted.

"Come on, Girlie. There we are. Now, isn't that nice? Come on now, open up your mouth and sing like a little birdie." His grimy hand patted her shoulder.

The child twisted the hem of her frayed dress. "Mommie's waiting, Doreen," Maggie told her. The bottles in a row behind the child gleamed and glistened like zircons. "Come on and sing," Maggie agonized. "Make us a few pennies. I got to have a drink.

"Come on, Baby, sing up about the poor little birdie shut in the mean old cage. Come on, Honey, you have to sing for Mommie. All ready. One, two, three."

The little girl opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. She sang in a loud, clear voice

that wavered in the middle of every line before it went off key. "I'm only a bird in a gilded cage."

When she was through, the men around the bar took their hands off their beer glasses long enough to clap. Money clattered onto the counter. A drunk over in the corner sobbed, "Puts me in mind of my own little girl. Pauline, I think her name was."

Maggie pushed two of the coins toward the barkeeper and slipped the rest into a dirty crash bag. "Make it straight," she told him. She downed the drink. Then she took Doreen by the hand. "Say good-bye to the nice men. Time to go home."

Doreen demurely turned around at the saloon door and waved twice. "Come on home, I said," Maggie repeated sharply and pulled her along.

Home? For four years, home had been a "flophouse" bed or one room with creepers in a cheap boarding house. Ever since Mr. Tice had deserted her when Doreen was born it had been that way. "But I still got you, Kid," Maggie whispered. "And I'm going to keep you. If those 'coppers' don't catch up to us again."

Maggie remembered how the police had caught up before. First the questions about how she was supporting the child. Then they'd sniffed at the room and looked under the bed for the bottles. But she'd outwitted them. For every time they'd snatched Doreen, she'd gone off the bottle, picked up a decent job, too. Then she'd gone around, clean and smiling. "See," she'd say. "I promise, I'll live right. just-give-me-back-my-daughter." After she got Doreen back, what the police didn't know about the way she lived didn't hurt anybody, that is, until they came snooping around again.

"We make out all right, don't we, Honey? We got each other." The woman and the little girl paused in front of a mud-speckled door. "Beds, cheap," the sign said. Maggie and Doreen went in.

A few months later, Maggie rolled over in bed one morning, ran her fingers through her snarled hair and gagged. Her head throbbed worse than ever. That rotten liquor at Joe's, she thought. She tried for sleep again. But the pounding hammered on.

"Hey, it's somebody at the door," she said. "All right, all right," she shouted toward the door, fumbling under the bed for her cotton wrapper.

A man's voice called, "Police, Maggie."

Maggie cowered away from the door. "What you want? I ain't done nothing."

The man's voice persisted. "Open up, Maggie, or I'll have to break in."

Maggie shambled toward the door, her frowzy wrapper stirring up dust. "I'm coming." Her hand shook toward the key in the door.

The sunlight that shot in when the door opened shone on a bottle half under the bed and a broken doll's head in the middle of the floor. Through the door strode a sturdy policeman and a woman.

Maggie and the woman stared at each other. "Mrs. Wilks," Maggie said. "I seen you before. You've come for my baby."

She whipped around, stumbled back into the room.

"Doreen. "

"We've come to take her," Mrs. Wilks said quietly. "No-no-no!" Maggie said.

From a cot in the corner, Doreen began to cry.

Mrs. Wilks signaled the policeman. He went over to the cot. "You've never lived up to any of your promises to keep a decent job so you could support her. I don't like to do this, Mrs. Tice. But there's nothing left to do," Mrs. Wilks said.

Maggie watched the policeman out the door. "Mommie, Mommie," the child wailed.

"Take her downstairs, Sergeant. Be careful, she looks sick, poor little thing," Mrs. Wilks said.

"Put her down, put her down," Maggie sobbed. "GOD, help me. If there is a GOD, don't let them take my baby." Then she turned on the woman. "You did this. It's all your fault."

"Mrs. Tice, I want to help. But we aren't going to let you have her back this time."

"Help me? You took my baby," Maggie screamed. "Get out, before I kill you."

Doreen was gone. What was the use in staying sober, in trying to fight back the fever for a bottle and another and another? Without the kid, what difference where she slept?

"Hey, Mister," she whined on the street comers. But the men laughed and went on. Her cotton stockings accordioned down her legs, her whole body sagged with the tiredness of an aging woman. "And I'm only thirty-five," she told herself; "too ugly for even that kind of money now."

But she could still beg. One day, wavering along State Street, she veered over toward a man.

"Excuse me, Mister, please. Got a dime for a cup of-"

"Hello, Maggie," the man said.

"Huh?" Maggie squinted at him.

"I've known you a long time Maggie. I'm over at the Pacific Garden Mission."

"That JESUS joint," Maggie spat. "Never mind, I don't want your mission money."

But the man held out a quarter. "Here," he said. "Take it."

Maggie reached out.

"Take it," he said again. She took it.

"I'm going to pray for you, Maggie. And Mother Clarke over at the mission is going to pray for you, too."

Maggie laughed and reeled on.

"Thanks for the quarter," she called back. "But you can't save my soul. I ain't got none to save."

You can beg just so much on Skid Row. Cash doesn't come easy down there and you can't pay room rent with handouts. Maggie found that out soon.

"So who needs a room?" she told her favorite bartender with a grin that showed all her bad teeth. "There's more than one place to sleep in this part of town. There's always the wooden sidewalks. Under them, I mean. It's free and it's dry, most of the time. And you know why I like it?" she lurched forward and giggled with a drunken silliness. "I can take my bottle to bed with me."

In the summer of 1910, sidewalk beds got popular. Sometimes, even crowded. So one hot night, Maggie drifted down South State Street, wondering where she'd spend the night. Dirty pages from old magazines mingled with cigarette wrappers and fluttered along the sidewalk. A music hall belched out noise. From another building down the street came more singing.

But that singing was different. Maggie came up even with the building and stopped. The door was open. A little woman with a mother's smile stood in the doorway.

Maggie tottered over to her.

"Maggie Tice, I'm so glad to see you, dear," the motherly woman said.

Maggie stopped in front of her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mother Clarke, Maggie. I've known who you were for a long time. I'm so proud of you for coming here tonight."

"Huh?"

"You picked just the right time to come in and give your life to JESUS."

Maggie edged around the woman, staring at her like a cat trapped in a strange room. Then she sidled up closer. She grinned. With a cozy matey attitude, she told the woman, "I got a quart in my shirtwaist. See?"

The motherly woman didn't step back. "Yes, I see you have. But you won't need that any more."

"Don't you try to take it away from me," Maggie said.

"You can hold it right there in your hands until you don't need it any more."

Maggie clutched the bottle with both hands, held it up to her face like a woman holds a baby that wants to play. She swayed back and forth with the bottle. She swayed over to the woman. "Look at me."

"I see you, Maggie."

"I want to ask you one question."

"Yes, Maggie?"

"Will you-kiss me?"

Maggie watched Mother Clarke closely. She saw her smile, bend forward and put her arms around her. Then she felt the kiss.

"You did it - you . . . did!" she gasped. Then, in the hallway of the old Pacific Garden Mission, Maggie knelt. With one hand, she clutched at Mother Clarke's arm; with the other, she held her bottle.

"Dear GOD," Mother Clarke prayed. After a few minutes, Maggie's bottle thudded on the floor and rolled away.

Maggie Tice said, "I accept JESUS CHRIST as my Saviour."

For six months and two weeks and three days, Maggie stayed away from the bottle. At the end of six months, two weeks and three days, she went to Mother Clarke's office. Her face was clean and her eyes were clear.

"Don't you think I've waited long enough now to try to get my little girl back?"

"Maybe you're thinking I ought to leave well enough alone. But my arms have never stopped aching from the morning they came and took her away. I can be a decent mother now, honest, I can."

Mother Clarke frowned. "As you wish, Maggie. Doreen must be almost eight. But remember, whatever happens, underneath you are the everlasting arms."

Maggie remembered the way to Mrs. Wilks' office. She remembered Mrs. Wilks, too.

"I'm Maggie Tice," she said, hesitantly.

"Maggie Tice? Why, I - can hardly believe it."

"I've changed a lot, Mrs. Wilks. I came about Doreen. Can I get to her? Is she still in the orphanage?"

Mrs. Wilks twisted a pencil in her fingers. "Maggie, sit down. Doreen has been permanently adopted by a family here in Chicago, a very fine family."

Maggie sat down.

"I know how hard it is going to be for you, Maggie. But at the time, well, it did seem like the best thing for Doreen."

"You mean, they won't let me see her?"

"The foster parents think that is best. No matter how much you've really changed."

Maggie leaned forward. "Do you suppose I could work for those people so's I could take care of her, see her every day?"

"No, Maggie, I'm afraid not. And that's final, too."

They've said that they don't want you to ever see Doreen."

Maggie stood up. "Thanks," she said. And she walked out.

Back to Skid Row Maggie walked that afternoon. She walked up to the bar on the corner and walked past it. She walked around and around, State Street, West Madison, Van Buren. Then, she walked back to the Pacific Garden Mission.

"There are other children, Maggie," Mother Clarke told her when she heard the story.

"Other children?" Maggie said dully. "Where?"

"Here in Chicago - and everywhere. In Kentucky, for example. I've heard of some children there that need love and need CHRIST too."

"And you think I could help them?" Maggie asked.

"I do," Mother Clarke said.

"Then I will."

And she did. For eighteen years, until she died, Maggie Tice, ex-barfly, ex-streetwalker, ex-drunk, was a missionary to underprivileged Kentucky children, giving them her love and telling them about the love of CHRIST. She never saw Doreen again, but as Maggie always said, "Whatever happens, underneath are the everlasting arms."

Maggie Tice has been at Home for years, enjoying the "place" her Saviour, the Lord JESUS, went to prepare for her, and there is "only glory over yonder."

~ end of chapter 8 ~